



## **Societal Places: The constitution of library space through activity**

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### **Abstract**

The paper shows how Hanna Arendt's concept of the public sphere can help us to find a new approach to the space of the library. Since the Arendtian concept is limited by her strong affection for the ancient Greek Polis and her aversion to mass-society, the article proposes a broadening. The strong distinction between private and public is superseded by the more open and dynamic idea of societal space. Societal space is being constituted through the manifoldness of activities taking place in it. Plurality and individual freedom are the conditions for this process. Different to the classical definition of the public space Arendt and Habermas referred to, societal space is defined through actions like labour, communication and study taking place at the same time. So it seems obvious, that libraries actually are societal spaces. But is it possible to transfer this concept from theory into practice? And what could be the strategies to make libraries open spaces in this sense?

### **Introduction**

While we often focus our thoughts on change to the technology and tools that we use, a more profound change is continually taking place around us. Today's communities are much more diverse ethnically, racially, linguistically and economically than those of a century ago.  
Tyckoson, 2003, S. 15

Facing the future of librarianship, we should give more attention to the dynamic changes of our society than to technological or economic debates. If we want to hold our position, we have to face the social challenges and to get in with the development of society. The physical space of the library is a special issue in such a discussion about the future of the library. On the one hand, the very existence of academic libraries as places is being challenged, on the other hand more and more concepts, expanding and thereby deeply modifying the space of the library, are being discussed. But not only librarians are changing their view on the library. Library building is being led out of the functionalist dead end it came into over the past four decades by groundbreaking architectural designs. More and more remarkable and attractive libraries have been being constructed, giving less attention to interchangeable and full-flexible space than to identification and the 'wow-effect'. One group is being focussed on, which has been seen in a more passive relation to library space so far: the users. We are discovering that the ambiances we have been pretending to design for the users are being shaped by them according to their own concepts. The search of a reliable place, enforced by the increasing of social change and the medial extension of the world, is an important drive for this.

There are still voices auguring the near end of particularly the academic library [e.g. Ross and Sennyey, 2008]. But altogether we can state a renaissance of library buildings today. New library buildings are being built not only in Europe and it is astonishing to realize how successful they are in respect of their gate counts. The circulation numbers and the use of printed material are declining simultaneously. Obviously many users are searching for something other than printed material in a library today. According to this libraries have been developing concepts to meet the new requirements of their clientele. One can find Living Rooms and Meeting Places, Learning Centres and Information Commons in public as well as in academic libraries and they are being used frequently. Such spaces are becoming indispensable part of national standards

like *Fachbericht 13* by German Institute for Standardisation (DIN).<sup>1</sup>

But how do they change the library? Will reading rooms and other classical working environments become outdated? And in which way do our users accept the new facilities? Acting instinctively right is always good, but it is even better to recognize why it is the right action. In the end we will have to convince those who have an old fashioned view on libraries and those who are always looking on libraries from a technical or economical point of view without respect to their social value; whether in the university, the community or in a globally networked knowledge society. A sociological point of view may help us to find theoretical approaches to the space of the library and to give reasons for our presumptions and findings, based in practice. An intensive discussion of sociological theory offers the LIS the basis for a self-conscious positioning in knowledge society. The space of the library is a good example, because in the social sciences there is a renaissance of space taking place as well.

In this paper I would like to propose a model that allows us to discuss the space of the library based on its actual use. My assumption is that this space is not primarily a shell defined by architecture, but constituted as a social space in its very use. The appearance of individuals in the public realm and their concerted activity converts the shell into a societal space. This approach is based mainly on the theory of political philosopher Hannah Arendt but modifies it at a critical point. I would like to show how we can develop a theory of societal space for the library on the basis of the Arendtian concept by overcoming the narrowness and exclusiveness of the public realm, the agora.

Therefore I would like to show exemplarily where we are standing in the discussion about the library as place. Afterwards I will discuss Hannah Arendt's approach to the public realm against this backdrop, proposing a possible advancement. Finally I will give an outline how to establish the societal space as

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<sup>1</sup> The next edition of *Fachbericht 13*, (to be issued by the beginning of 2009) will set standards for learning spaces and communication spaces.

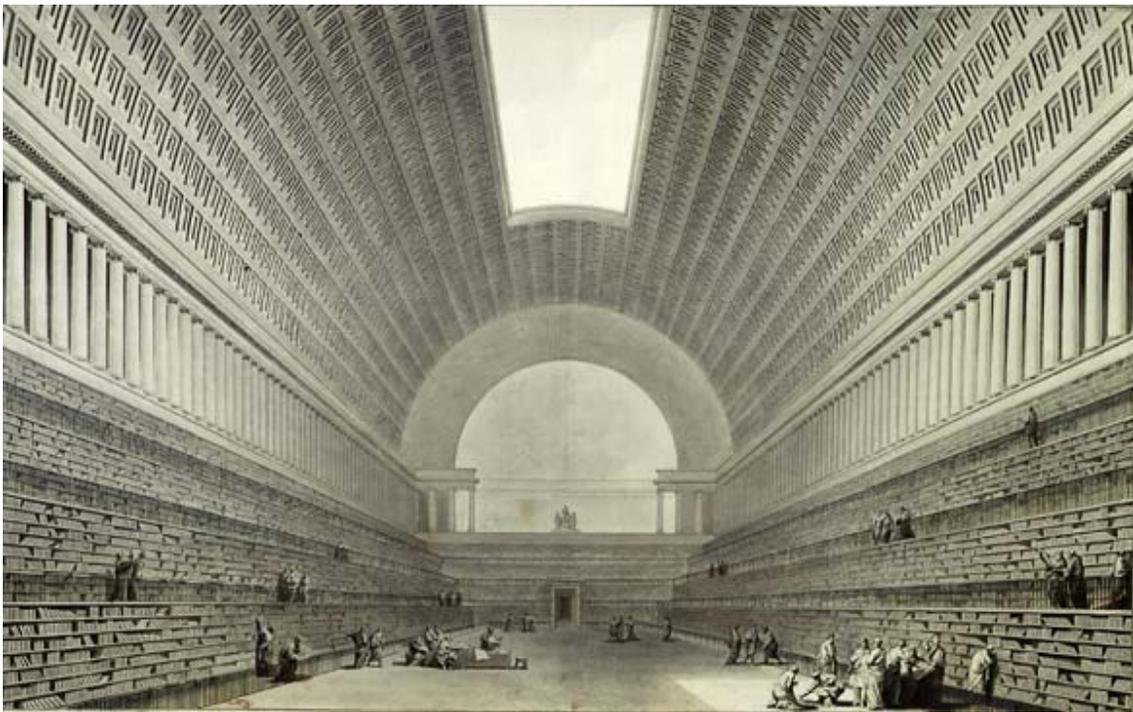
a place for informational participation.

### **Buildings without Walls – Libraries without Limits?**

Many librarians are seeing the library per se and as a physical space in an ongoing crisis. Ross and Sennyey for example are stating in a solitary economically based evaluation of today's academic libraries, that the discussion about the library as space is only an abstraction from the real problems of academic libraries. According to the authors new space concepts are not part of what they see as key issues for libraries against the backdrop of alleged sinking gate counts. [Ross and Sennyey, 2008, p. 150]. With regard to the current success stories in the construction of libraries this argumentation seems to be absurd. It is mainly based on a binary concept characterizing the debate about informational society as I stated elsewhere [cf. Eigenbrodt, 2008, p. 91]. Ross and Sennyey amalgamate this concept with a prediction of decay circulating since three decades at least. This assertion originally dates back to the 60s of the last century and has been propagated mainly in the 90s – astoundingly mostly by librarians themselves. But mass digitalisation, the distribution of electronic materials also in the Humanities and the introduction of Web 2.0 tools in libraries are fuelling these speculations. But they can not be substantiated by empirical evidence [cf. Gayton, 2008, p. 62]. Ross and Sennyey's idea of library space however is based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of libraries.

The great academic libraries of this time have been buildings with stacks and grand reading rooms. Working in such a place was about silent contemplation. The reader had been alone with his book at his place together with many other readers, all busy with their own research. Two factors had been bringing about this development: The rapid increase of knowledge in printed form and the professionalisation of scholarship and librarianship as well. Libraries with stacks have been the most pragmatic solution in dealing with the growing holdings. And the perceived solitary scholar had been a link in the chain of divided knowledge production.

Libraries have begun to open their stacks contemporaneous with the opening up of higher education and the progressing democratisation of the education system on the whole. More and more big open shelf libraries appeared on the university campuses - at first in the United States, later all over the world – popularising open access to knowledge. But although grand reading rooms have been abolished in many cases, libraries have still been used as places of silent communication. This use of the library has been thwarted by open, ostensibly flexible architectures that turned out to be open to sound transmission primarily. Users have been being allocated and have to sit between the shelves like in stacks. But fortunately this kind of full flexible library has nearly being overcome. It is not the freshest idea that libraries can offer rooms for group work and the exchange of ideas. On the one hand many libraries have already been daring the step to open communication spaces without antiquating the zones of silent work. On the other hand I would like to examine the issue from the historical perspective referring to concepts of Enlightenment.



Etienne Louis Boullée: Vue intérieure de la nouvelle salle projetée pour

l'agrandissement de la bibliothèque du Roi, 1785

The famous sketch for a Royal Library in Paris by Etienne Louis Boullée looks like the nightmare of a librarian. It would be a monstrous, draughty and inefficient building. But the draft has a quality appearing only on second sight. Boullée sketches an open space for the discourse, following ancient and Renaissance paragons. He envisions the library as a place for public controversy. Even though his sketches had less influence on realised architecture and many of them disappeared until the 1950s, we can ascertain an idea of the library as public space that is strongly connected to the epistemology of Enlightenment.

It is popular to consider the idea of scientific networking a concept of the digital age. But important scholars of Enlightenment like Benjamin Franklin and Alexander von Humboldt established impressive scientific networks and encouraged the public discourse about science at the same time. For this purpose they both used the emerging public sphere, described in detail by Juergen Habermas [cf. Habermas, 1990, pp. 90 et seq.]. Our modern libraries are one of the institutions that have been formed by that spirit.

After all there are neither historical nor contemporary reasons for the idea that the designated use of libraries is exclusively the silent study of information resources. In fact new concepts of library space are arising continuously. Each one of them is associated with a wide range of functions. Social and also 'culinary' spaces are being offered to the users more and more besides the zones for study and learning. Jeffrey T. Gayton differentiates categorically the social and the communal functions.

A communal academic library is not the same as a social academic library. The social model envisions a library in which students and faculty collaborate and communicate with each other in the creation of new knowledge. [...] The problem is that the social model undermines something that is highly valued in academic libraries: the communal nature of quiet, serious study. Gayton, 2008, p. 60

This contradistinction of social and communal activity is formative for the entire space of the library. Verbal communication like discussion and conversation is the main activity in the social space [ib., S. 61]. These processes are related to

the Enlightenment ideal of the discursive public. The communal space in comparison reminds of the contemplative atmosphere of 19<sup>th</sup> century reading rooms. "Communal activity in a library involves seeing and being seen quietly engaged in study." [ib.]. The decisive factor is that this is a quiet but no solitary study. The appearance or rather presence of a third makes the situation a communal one.

The space is being constituted as a public place for knowledge either by the communicative activity of exchange or by appearing of the individuals for one another. But this is to a lesser extent about the question of 'quiet' or 'noisy' – the 'psht-effect'. It is about an older and for the space of the library crucial difference. Gayton cites Scott Bennett and refers to the social library as "domestic spaces" [ib.]. According to this model the social space is associated with the private sphere whereas the communal space belongs to the public realm. In Sociology this differentiation is one of the constitutive dividing lines for the definition of spaces in society.

But it is very difficult to comprehend Gayton's association of public scholarly discourse and the private realm. Both Juergen Habermas and Hannah Arendt locate this kind of activity definitely in the public sphere. But in which way can the regard to the user's activities help us to qualify the space and to estimate its impact on the library at all?

### **Appearance, Action, Freedom – the societal space**

Sociologically speaking, space comes into existence only after its definition by society. According to that it is no presocial category but something social determined, "das sich räumlich konfiguriert und in dieser Form wieder Rückwirkungen auf das Soziale ausübt." [Schroer, 2006, p. 63]. But how is space being constituted in the social context? Public space is being defined in the first instance against the private realm. Specific characteristics and activities that can be located exclusively have been allocated to both spheres in the past.

The German-American philosopher and sociologist Hannah Arendt presented one

of the last exhaustive theories based on the dichotomy of private and public realm. In doing so she proceeded consequently not from the space itself but from activity. Arendt differentiates labour, work and action as basic categories of human activity, the *vita activa* [Arendt, 1958, pp. 9 et seq.]. She locates labour as means to meet the human necessities in the household and therefore in the private realm. Work and action are belonging to the public sphere. Real freedom does only exist in the sphere where the human being overcomes the vital necessities, so the private [ib., p. 29]. This kind of freedom according to Arendt had ideally been realized in the ancient Greek Polis. However the appearance in the public sphere is not conceivable without the private realm.

Thus within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals.  
Arendt, 1958, pp. 30 et seq.

Thus the freedom of appearing and acting in the public sphere is always related to the private realm, where this freedom does not exist and hence one has to dissociate of it. This dissociation initially turns the human being limited to the vital necessities into a citizen. Since the space arises out of the appearance of humans, being and appearance are correlated. "Normally, we say that something must first *be* in order then to *appear*. Here, however, we are saying that it must *appear* if it is to *be*." [Mensch, 2007, p. 32].

The public space is a sphere of collective freedom growing out of individual freedom which makes the latter initially possible. In the course of this it is being shaped by the concerted action of individuals, just like it is arising out of their appearance. The emphasis of individual freedom in concerted action is crucial for this concept. "Der politisch-öffentliche Bereich ist dann der weltlich sichtbare Ort, an dem Freiheit sich manifestieren, in Worten, Taten, Ereignissen wirklich werden kann [...]" [Arendt, 2000, p. 207]. Therefore we are able to define constitutive characteristics of the public space based on the Arendtian approach:

- it can be defined against the private realm
- there is an interdependence between individual freedom and the freedom

of appearance in the public sphere

- thus the public space enables freedom first and foremost
- it is growing out of the appearance of the individual as citizen
- it is being shaped by the concerted action of individuals

Admittedly this model is limited by two crucial factors. For one thing it is closely associated with the ancient Greek Polis; for another thing Hannah Arendt is critical of modern mass society. That means a difficulty in transferring it to the knowledge society which is increasing modern mass society by global networking. Hence I would like to propose an adaptation of Hannah Arendt's theory allowing us an approach to the public space in the knowledge society.

Arendt's affirmative approach with the ancient Greek polis has always been evocating criticism. The model of freedom she develops on the basis of this society depends on the negation of those individuals staying back in the private realm and therewith enabling the appearance of the citizen in the public sphere [cf. e.g. Benhabib, 1992, p. 75]. But it has to be annotated that Arendt has been aware of this elitist trait of her theory. Furthermore Arendt is narrowed down to politics. All activity besides labour which is not political belongs to the domain of work. Among these are the intellectual activities of thinking and cognition as far as they are purposeful [Arendt, 1958, p. 151]. Merely the philosopher's freedom of thought, the *vita contemplativa* stands outside of this schema. According to this the library would be a place, where the active man, the *homo faber* pursues his activities. And even the activity Gayton characterises as contemplation stands, if purposeful, outside the public-political sphere.

But why is this approach so anachronistic? Actually a simple differentiation between political, public and private space would suggest itself analogously to the activities. But this would mean that the political did practically not take place in modern representative democracies. Arendt states referring to Thomas Jefferson that the nature of representative democracy is the delegation of action respectively the political activity [cf. Arendt, 1963, p. 238 et seq.]. However it is

inconceivable for a working civil society that politics takes place only in the domain of the parliaments. In fact there is an amalgamation of different activities and therewith the different spheres.

Arendt sees in this process the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer "act" but "merely behave" as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers.

Benhabib, 1992, p. 75

The separations are beginning to become diffuse when society is to be formed as a pluralistic constellation. Action and work are intermingling in the public sphere and the private is revealing as well. The societal neutralizes the divides between the spheres and the public space becomes multifunctional. But Arendt regards the clear distinction between the spheres as a precondition for social and individual stability. Not the mass of people itself is her problem about a mass society, but the lack of power "to relate and to separate them" [Arendt, 1958, p. 48]. The political thinking of Hannah Arendt has been deeply affected by the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and above all German National Socialism. Such regimes in fact are disintegrating the divides between the spheres in order to occupy political action. The destruction of the public space – the balance of closeness in interaction and civilised distance of the individuals - is the main characteristic of the mass society turned into totalitarianism. But Arendt takes a pessimistic stock of working society even when there are no totalitarian conditions [cf. *ib.*, p. 115]. Juergen Habermas regards the diffusion of public and private spheres critical alike, but he is not so strict in the differentiation of both realms [cf. Habermas, 1990, p. 223].

So, is the public space a historical topos which cannot work in today's society? I don't think so. Both Arendt and Habermas tried to present a comprehensive description of the public space in its historic evolution. In doing so they described important characteristics of the public space. But their deliberations have normative character. Both founder on this because the social changes of the last decades cannot be brought in line with a stable structure [cf. Eigenbrodt, 2006, p.11]. So for one thing we can build upon the theory of the

public space, Hannah Arendt formulated, for another thing we have to face social challenges so as not to persist on an idealistic point of view. I think a further development of her approach with this in mind should concentrate on the concept of the societal. As mentioned before, this term is connoted negatively by Hannah Arendt. But what she regards as a problem could be a good from my point of view.

Since the rise of society, since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established sphere of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm. Arendt, 1958, p. 42

The sphere of intimacy according to Arendt is the oddment of the private remaining in the hidden realm of the household. The societal space is blanket and can develop in a way where the private, the public, the political and even the intimate intermingle publicly. Otherwise space has always being seen as the stagnating, reactionary concept in the western intellectual tradition, whereas time has being taken as dynamic, flexible and progressive. In this tradition progress is associated with the overcoming of space [cf. Schroer, 2006, p. 21]. A motion is inherent to the societal space, associated by Arendt with growing. I would characterise this as a dynamic, liberating the space from the static tradition mentioned above. Therewith societal space has got a flexibility enabling him to respond to social and individual processes of change. Individuals are not always (acting) citizens. They are changing their roles and their interaction. Equally the societal space can arise nearly everywhere where people interact equal. Space is changing content and shape with every interaction taking place in it [cf. Gorham, 2000, p.33]. Physical spaces remain variable and flexible only to a certain degree. As societal spaces they are much more changeable, actually they have got a mandatory contingency.

With good reason Hannah Arendt was apprehensive of the alienation of the individual in mass society. At the same time she describes an artificial communitarianisation in the world of products and consumption. Today these processes are one of the greatest social challenges. The further development of

the public into a societal space could be part of the answer. It becomes obvious that the societal space must not be exclusive and that politics must not be delegated into a space outside society itself. "Participation is seen not as an activity only possible in a narrowly defined political realm but as an activity that can be realized in the social and cultural spheres as well" [Benhabib, 1992, p. 86]. To fulfil this mission, the societal space has to assure access to the public and with it individual freedom for all members of society. Hannah Arendt herself already suggested that action is not always political action in the strict sense of the word but that it is about communication and undertaking something together in the first place [cf. Schönherr-Mann, 2006, p. 119].

A theory of societal space should evolve in a discussion on this basis. But let me summarise the following characteristics for now:

- the strict differentiation of private, public and political sphere is to be replaced by a dynamic open space
- this space is multifunctional und will continue to be constituted by the activities taking place in it
- the interdependence of individual freedom and freedom of public appearance defines the societal space as well
- the societal space is based on rational coordination and association of interests in terms of Max Weber [Weber, 1947, p.21]

The introduction of the societal space allows us to describe the space of the library in a way that is adequate to anticipate social changes beyond technological or economic discourses. But is this only about theory or is it possible to deduce practical consequences? Concluding I want to show some associations to the current discussion about library space and to present approaches to an application of this model.

## Societal Space and Place of Contemplation

Geoffrey T. Freeman is one of the few scholars considering the library not only from a functionalist perspective but emphasising the importance of the societal space for the individual:

It is a place where people come together on levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location. Upon entering the library, the student becomes part of a larger community – a community that endows one with a greater sense of self and higher purpose.

Freeman, 2005, p. 6

Herein the interdependence of *Vergesellschaftung* and individuality becomes clear. The individual participates in the community within library without merging in it. This applies as for public as for academic libraries. Thereby a low-threshold access is important, like it is described in the concept of low-intensive meeting place [cf. Audunson, 2005, p. 436].

But isn't such a space in fact contrary to the contemplative character of libraries suggested by Gayton? I think that this is not in first place a question of design I will come back to that later. At first we have to differentiate two processes. As mentioned above most activities in libraries belong to *homo faber's* purposeful processes of thinking and cognition. In Hannah Arendt's definition *vita contemplativa* is associated only with the freedom of objectless thinking. Therefore real contemplation takes place very rarely. Gorham's reflections about the university classroom are suggesting the question whether the strict differentiation is really necessary. Gorham regards the classroom as nexus of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, because here free exchange of thoughts takes place as well as free thinking [Gorham, 2000, p. 160]. In my opinion this is worth for libraries all the more. No other place offers so much freedom to let wander around thoughts and to discuss ideas with other people. Either coincide in the moment of appearance.

Also the freedom of thought, apparently dissociated from the societal sphere and

drafted in the concept of *vita contemplativa*, does not get along without the figure of the other. We are reliant on the intersubjective experiences to become aware of this freedom. This is because freedom is always based on the choice between possibilities, which can be recognised only through the encounter with other people [cf. Mensch, 2007, p. 33]. For another thing appearance does not necessarily mean action [cf. p. 8]. But seeing and being seen is an important factor in the moment of contemplation. This manifests itself in the undiminished attraction of reading rooms, also mentioned by Freeman [Freeman, 2005, p. 6]. When putting Gayton's implicit valuation of both activities beside because they are equal in a societal space, one can say, that *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* do not only exist parallel in the societal space of the library but also have a common place there, facilitated by possibility and appearance.

Nevertheless one cannot ignore the problems brought along with this in an open, full-flexible library building. "Social activities are not always compatible with communal activities. Conversation, scholarly or not, can be a distraction from serious study in a communal place" [Gayton, 2008, p. 61]. Because of its dynamic and multifunctionality, a societal space has not only to be open but it also has to allow different activities without mutual disturbances. This is the moment when architecture comes into the play. Open, full-flexible library buildings achieve the exact opposite of what they have been built for. The spaces growing out of such designs do precisely not tolerate an open and flexible utilisation, when activities are impeding each other. According to this architecture is not only responsible for the implementation of functional requirements or an attractive atmosphere but makes an important contribution to the goals of the library regarding the societal space. In opposition to Gorham I don't think that the abolishment of separations between different areas is helpful here [Gorham, 2000, ch. 7, ann. 8]. The building rather has to bring people together without preventing them from secluding in more quiet areas. Additionally there have to be areas allowing the users to discover and configure the space for themselves. An elaborated layout in this sense is crucial for the full development of the possibilities provided by the library as societal space. Bidding

adieu to the collection orientated library of the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not mean the abandonment of either the library building in total or the quiet reading areas, allowing individuals to come across while studying in silence.

## **Conclusion**

Hannah Arendt's model has still been being relevant for the theoretical approach to the public sphere fifty years after the publication of *The Human Condition*. The broadening of her concept to the societal space effectively parallels the movement from the proximity into the distance, characterising modernity [cf. Schroer, 2006, p. 10]. Getting from the ancient Greek Polis through to knowledge society also means to leave a protected, secure space and facing the contingency of social dynamics. But for all that the societal space as described above is a space where the individual can become self-aware through its appearance. Concerted action like seeing and being seen help to position oneself within social change. If libraries face this challenge and connect it with the possibility of informational participation, they achieve a unique selling point putting another complexion on the future relevance of library space. As I have shown, this is not about qualities that need to be reinvented, but that are always inherent in libraries. A well-founded theoretical reflection is as important as the development of strategies for the implementation of such concepts in order to activate and communicate those qualities.

This also means to intensely investigate the societal space. When exactly does this space occur? How can individuals be enabled to become apparent? Which kind of demeanour is appearance at all? What is the relation between time and space in this concept? Is it possible to present societal spaces as such? This is only a sample of the questions to be answered. Thereof results a worthwhile approach for a further discussion about the library as space.

At the same time library architecture has to search for new patterns facilitating the societal space. In doing so the balance of social and communal areas in Gayton's sense is as important as the spirit to try out new things. Librarians

have more than 500 years of know-how in creating appropriate environments for their users. Today they need this knowledge to design spaces of informational participation in the knowledge society.

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